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Challenges to decentralisation in Ghana: where do citizens seek assistance?

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ABSTRACT
Decentralisation in Ghana, and across sub-Saharan Africa, faces a number of challenges to successful local governance provision because there are a number of formal and informal actors to choose from. Citizens may take problems they want a governance provider to solve to a member of parliament or a district assembly person, a traditional chief or a police officer, a neighbour or an NGO. In this article we report on a four-constituency survey administered to explore and understand how citizens choose between the options of local institutions available to them in order to solve a problem important to their community or themselves. We find that formal national (Parliamentarians) and informal traditional (Chiefs) institutions are where respondents turn for assistance most often instead of constitutionally described local modes of governance (District Assemblies). We consider the implications of this finding in terms of decentralisation in Ghana and the need to build institutions that are context-sensitive and reflect how citizens understand political options.

Introduction

African countries have, for several decades, served as sites for a range of reform efforts intended to make governments increasingly able to effectively deliver services and improve responsiveness to their citizenry. At the core of this so-called good governance strategy is the concept of decentralisation where political power is delegated to local authorities with the expectation that local institutions will evolve to suit local conditions, prove effective at solving individual and community problems, and simultaneously nurture democratic habits and practices (Ndegwa, 2002; USAID, 2010). The record of success for decentralisation and local governance strategies has been mixed on the continent at best and abysmal at worst. Pessimists have gone as far as to argue that the concept has left only unfulfilled promises (Ojendal & Dellnas, 2013).

The implementation of decentralisation faces both structural and institutional challenges ranging from disconnects between power and capacity, patrimonialism, clientelism, and the presence of informal institutions shaping choices and behaviours (Olowu & Wunsch, 2004). These pre-existing challenges point to the need to conceive of local governance as a broader concept that reaches beyond the formalities of decentralisation. One particularly fruitful path forward relies on reconsidering how formal democratic governance institutions can be developed within the structural and contextual conditions in which countries across Africa find themselves (Hyden, 2017). For example, Myers and Fridy (2017) argue that decentralisation can be effective when formal institutions, such as District Assemblies, are complemented by and cooperate with traditional institutions, such as Chiefs. Such an approach is consistent with a view of institutions, not as monolithic, but as malleable, with the result that unpredictable combinations may prove the most effective (Berk & Galvan, 2009).

Determining which institutions or combinations prove to be the most effective at delivering services and solving problems appears to be a central challenge of decentralisation policies. Conventional supply-driven approaches that emphasise government leaders and officials actively engaged in the provision of public goods and the attendant institutions necessary to deliver such policy promises have not proven very successful in the African context (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2013). We, therefore, embrace a revised supply-driven approach that focuses on who individual citizens turn to for help with a range of individual and community dilemmas based not on who codified laws suggest is the appropriate authority but on the citizenry's cognitive landscape of governance providers. The goal of this paper then is to explore and understand how citizens choose among the menu of local institutions available to them in order to solve a problem important to them or their community. To do this, we administered a four-constituency survey in Ghana, which asked respondents who they would contact for help solving a total of nine problems. This descriptive analysis reveals how decentralisation has provided a variety of options for citizens to have needs met. We conclude with a discussion that considers the implications of our findings for the policy of decentralisation and the need for institutional flexibility that is context-sensitive.

Supply-driven approaches and decentralisation

Beginning in the early 1990s, a wave of democratic reforms made their way throughout sub-Saharan Africa (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). One such reform was decentralisation, or the process whereby the national or central government devolves power to regional or local units, and was heralded as a policy that would deliver more efficiency, better governance, greater equity, improved development, and poverty reduction (Smoke, 2003). Given

how poorly so many centralised states were performing, the allure of decentralisation is not difficult to ascertain (Wunsch & Olowu, 1990). As a panacea for many of the governance ills facing the continent, however, the honeymoon for decentralisation was short-lived. Bierschenk and Sardan's study of decentralisation in Benin, for example, demonstrates that the policy failed to deliver on greater public participation, better governance, and more accountability (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2003). Others have noted that the policy of decentralisation seems to be full of failed and unfulfilled promises and that almost no robust empirical findings support decentralisation as a solution to weak and unaccountable governance in Africa (Ojendal & Dellnas, 2013; Treisman, 2007).

Explanations abound as to why decentralisation has not been an effective policy at heralding economic development and democratisation. Following Hyden (2017), we classify and describe these explanations as supply-driven approaches, which has dominated democratic reforms in Africa, and make the critical assumption that government leaders and officials are primarily driven by the desire to deliver public goods (Booth & Golooba-Mutebi, 2013). This assumes that leaders are primarily motivated first by the desire to be re-elected, which is facilitated by the creation and maintenance of issue-based political parties that reinforce democratic claims to legitimacy through the delivery of policies that benefit the party faithful and the public at-large (Aldrich, 1995; Mayhew, 1974). In this equation, free and fair elections, the rule of law, government oversight, and the like facilitate a government that can serve and be responsive to a market economy and an actively engaged citizenry. Decentralisation policies seek to bring these institutions closer to the people under the assumption that proximity increases the probability of success.

If these assumptions about leaders and other political elites, as well as the public more generally, do not hold then it should be no great surprise that various democratic reforms associated with supply-driven approaches have not been successful. Put more bluntly, 'politics in Africa […] does not follow this policy paradigm' (Hyden, 2017, p. 103). Both Treisman and the World Bank have acknowledged that solely shrinking physical distance between government and the governed does not advance democratic decentralisation. In other words, the supply of institutions and their proximity must be reevaluated and, perhaps, reimagined if decentralisation is to prove effective (Devarajan & Reinikka, 2003; Treisman, 2007).

Olowu and Wunsch (2004) argue that the challenges facing decentralisation are both structural and institutional, which include factors such as a mismatch between power and capacity of local authorities, popular understandings of the role of citizenship, private goods prevailing over public goods, informal institutions, and incentive driven policies. These factors allow political leaders to transform politics into a patronage game

where local residents with low levels of civic capacity and are dependent on goods and resources that can only be obtained from outside their community (Hyden, 2017). The patronage game is facilitated by the 'moral matrix' that surrounds and embeds popular conceptions about the use of political power, rights and responsibilities of office, and the boundaries of the political world. 'Father-Family-Food' serves as the foundation supporting the practices of clientelism and neopatrimonialism (Schatzberg, 2001). It may be perfectly rational for people in such a system to seek out a person with power and influence, no matter their official position or level, that can broker results even if what is sought are private rather than public goods (Joseph, 1983).

This observation compels reconsideration of how local institutions operate within the structural conditions in which political elites and the public are situated. Shivakumar argues that formal institutions that resemble the shared habits and practices of its people can achieve societal ends like stability and development (Shivakumar, 2005). Empirical evidence suggests that successful African states are built at least partially upon precolonial foundations (Englebert, 2000). Myers and Fridy (2017), similarly, demonstrate that cooperating traditional institutions enhance formal democratic institutions. Put another way, fully functioning institutions that are relevant and operative in the daily lives of their citizens must be recreated or reinvented drawing at least significantly from pre-existing cultural resources (Kelsall, 2008).

North argues that institutions that are useful for development depend on the emergence of informal rules, norms, and values that support and facilitate the creation of formal institutions (North, 1981). Another way of conceiving of informal rules, norms, and values are what Berk and Galvan (2009, p. 552) refer to as 'lived skills.' Individuals and groups collectively puzzle through problems and challenges that they commonly face and through an iterative process of combination and recombination an effective response to a problem emerges (Weick, 2001). These solutions becomes common learned responses, which are then made part of the iterative process of combination and recombination that people draw from to respond to challenges in their lives. Importantly, a solution to a problem does not necessarily result in a universal singular response or the monolithic creation of an institution; one approach may not always work in all situations. For this reason, institutions are dynamic, not inert, and are constantly being formed in different and unpredictable ways. It is in this sense that institutions are made through action and the result of lived skills (Berk & Galvan, 2009). Supply-driven approaches that are focused on institutions need to pay attention to how people go about solving problems and then promote flexibility in terms of institutional design and response to facilitate successful governing structures.

The policy of decentralisation cannot fulfil its promises of improved efficiency, governance, equity, and development unless and until a greater understanding and appreciation for structural and institutional context is

undertaken (Smoke, 2003). Arguably, a primary reason for the failure of decentralisation is that newly decentralised institutions are simply piled on top of pre-existing ones, which increases the complexity and fluidity of local politics (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan, 2003). Far from providing an effective avenue of response to solving local problems, decentralisation policies simply create additional complexities in navigating an abundant supply of institutional actors. If this is the case then decentralisation may not be the problem, but rather how the public understands how authority has devolved into a complicated constelation of institutional authorities, some of which seem familiar and others exotic.

Decentralisation in Ghana

From the early years of the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC), Flt.-Lt. Jerry Rawlings promised to decentralise government removing power from elites in Accra and placing it in the hands of the 'common people' (Nugent, 1995, pp. 136–142). Thus far the pinnacle of this not fully realised process was the advent of Ghana's district assembly system in 1989. From the outset the responsibilities of these new local governments were ill-defined both de jure and de facto (Ayee, 1996; Crook, 1994). The Ghanaian transition to democracy and the 1992 constitution codified the earlier promise of a less centralised state with a mandated decentralisation policy that required Parliament to devolve power and resources to local units. Ghana was among a number of other sub-Saharan African states to adopt and implement a policy of decentralisation as a means of moving beyond centralised governance, characteristic of authoritarian rule, toward a system of democratic governance (Connerly, Eaton, & Smoke, 2010; Crook & Manor, 1998; Grindle, 2007; Ndegwa & Levy, 2004; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Wunsch & Olowu, 1990).

A number of scholars have noted that decentralisation policies often result in more confusion than clarity with respect to the various components of political and fiscal organisation and authority (Fritzen & Lim, 2006). Examples of confusing institutional arrangements in Ghana include local assemblies comprised partly of members elected locally and others appointed from Accra as well as guarantes of revenue transfers from the capital and independent tax authority (Ayee, 2008). The ability of local authorities, principally District Assemblies, to effectively deliver public services is of particular importance given that decentralisation policies have primarily devolved power to this institution. Unfortunately, local administrative incompetence, conflicts between local and central government officials, and delays in the transfer of funds to local units has led a number of studies to conclude that the Ghanaian decentralisation policy, in general, and the performance of the District Assemblies specifically, has been uneven at best and awful at worst (Ahwoi, 2010; Ayee, 1999; Debrah, 2009).

There have been some successes and promises of future successes. District Assemblies have commenced a number of locally driven development projects, which include 'the construction of small dams, the drilling of boreholes, provision refuse containers, the operation of educational and health facilities and the rehabilitation of dilapidated facilities and equipment' (Debrah, 2014, p. 57). Despite limited institutional capacity, there are occasional glimmers of hope that demonstrate the potential for decentralisation leading to development. Akufo-Addo's campaign promise in 2016 of 'One District, One Factory' seems to point to a modicum of confidence at the top, or at least a recognition that lipservice in this direction is useful, that renewed interest in districts as governance units is just around the corner. But election after election the major partisan cleavages in Ghana seem to colour local political issues suggesting that the formal nonpartisan local politics of District Assemblies might not be able to exist outside of that larger national discourse (Kumah-Abiwu, 2017).

Throughout Africa, as well as Ghana, the mistakes and errors caused by decentralisation have opened up opportunities for traditional institutions and even non-governmental organisations to maintain or establish themselves in the lives of citizens. The legitimacy and power of traditional institutions, such as chiefs, is drawn from the sacred and political order that preceded the imposition of colonialism as well as Article 270 in the Ghanaian Constitution of the Fourth Republic that prohibited Parliament from interfering in the recognition of chiefs (Ray, 1996). Since chiefs are locally based traditional institutions, decentralisation policies that create or devolve power to formal state institutions must account for the pre-existence of such culturally entrenched mechanisms of governance (Cappelen & Sorens, 2018; Schatzberg, 2001). Relatedly, civil society actors, often in the form of NGOs, regularly take the lead on development, particularly in rural areas of Ghana. In these rural areas it is not uncommon to see school blocks, public toilets, income generating schemes, and other public works tagged with the name and symbol of whatever NGO provided the source of funding. At times these organisations are grassroots but often they are multinational and relatively well funded which gives them a leg up on local government in hiring the best trained bureaucrats to set social safety and public works' agendas (Mohan, 2002).

As Lentz (1998) notes, power in Ghana, as elsewhere in Africa, is diffused among different registers of power whether they be economic, political, or traditional, which creates an array of potential suppliers of solutions for problems encountered by the public. If the public is pragmatic and understands challenges faced without regard to which institution provides a solution then we would naturally expect citizens to seek out a variety of institutional actors (Shotton & Winter, 2006). The challenge facing successful decentralisation policies is whether the public can manoeuvre through the variety of choices

presented to them when facing a problem and the extent to which the public converges on efficient and fair institutions when they require assistance should serve as the barometer of decentralisation.

Survey instrument, data, measurement

To assess the status of Ghanaian decentralisation policies, we designed and carried out a survey of Ghanaian attitudes using a wide variety of individual and community-based problems in order to uncover what type of institutional actors citizens contact for help and assistance. Four hundred total respondents participated in the four-constituency survey.[1] One hundred surveys were administered in each constituency and respondents were selected via a multi-tiered randomisation approach. The sample is stratified by gender with half of the respondents being male and the other half female.[2] The constituencies surveyed includ Odododiodio, Ayawaso West Wuogon, Bolgatanga, and Nabdam, which represent extremes in population density, wealth, ethnic heterogeneity, and geographic location as opposed to being a representative sample. Odododiodoo is a poor and urban district while Ayawaso West Wuogon is a wealthy and urban district. Both constituencies are located in Ghana's capital in the south of the country. Bolgatanga is a smaller, regional capital in northern Ghana. Nabdam is rural, poor, and also located in northern Ghana. The diversity of the selected constituencies vary with respect to four key contextual dimensions: North/South, urban/rural, rich/poor, and capital/regional. Such variation follows a most different system design where similarities that emerge across the constituencies can be said to be representative of the general state of Ghanaian public life. The survey instrument allows us to consider to what degree, if any, differences in the constituency settings contribute to how Ghanaians navigate the supply of various institutional actors when determining whom to contact about a particular problem.

The survey begins with a series of demographic questions that included age, gender, level of education,[3] whether respondents were born in the area or not,[4] type of religion practiced (Christian, Islam, Traditionalist, or Other), and political party supported (NPP, NDC, Nkrumahist, Other, None).[5] Summary statistics for each of these variables by constituency are included in Table 1.

In terms of cross-constituency comparisons of demographic characteristics, Ayawaso West Wuogon and Nabdam are the two most divergent constituencies with Odododiodoo and Bolgatanga between the two. Ayawaso West Wuogon is the youngest, most educated, has the most respondents that are born outside the constituency, is the most Christian, and is the most supportive of the NPP and least supportive of the NDC. Nabdam, on the other hand, is the oldest, the least educated, has the most respondents born

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of constituencies.

	Nabdam	Bolgatanga	Odododiodio	Ayawaso West	Paired T-Test
Age					$t = 62.61***$
N	99	99	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	42.03	37.66	37.16	36.27	
Std. Dev.	10.12	9.67	12.72	11.08	
Min/Max	20/75	19/65	18/75	18/63	
Gender					$t = -32.62***$
N	100	100	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	
Std. Dev.	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.5	
Min/Max	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	
Education					$t = 7.86***$
N	100	100	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	1.82	2.49	3.34	4.89	
Std. Dev.	1.35	1.70	1.59	1.75	
Min/Max	1/6	1/7	1/7	1/7	
Home					$t = -25.71***$
N	100	100	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	1	0.72	0.74	0.32	
Std. Dev.	0	0.45	0.44	0.47	
Min/Max	1/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	
Religion					$t = - 10.18***$
N	100	100	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	1.91	2.03	1.57	1.08	
Std. Dev.	0.98	0.90	0.92	0.31	
Min/Max	1/3	1/4	1/4	1/3	
Party ID					
NPP					$t = -41.33***$
N	100	100	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	0.16	0.11	0.29	0.44	
Std. Dev.	0.37	0.32	0.46	0.50	
Min/Max	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	
NDC					$t = -32.84***$
N	100	100	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	0.47	0.47	0.43	0.38	
Std. Dev.	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.49	
Min/Max	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	
Nkrumahist					$t = -37.38***$
N	100	100	100	100	($p < 0.000$)
Mean	0.24	0.27	0.03	0.04	
Std. Dev.	0.43	0.45	0.17	0.20	
Min/Max	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	

inside the constituency, and is strongly supportive of the NDC. Bolgatanga is the least Christian, the least supportive of the NPP, and is the most supportive of the Nkrumahists. Lastly, Odododiodoo is the least supportive of the Nkrumahists. A series of paired t-tests were conducted for each demographic characteristic across all four constituencies reveals statistically significant differences at the greater than 99.99% level (p < 0.000) validating our most different systems design approach.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about individual and community needs or problems and whom they would seek out for assistance. The questions take the following form: 'If (your community/you) needs (blank), who do you think is the best person to take your concerns to?' and

then asked 'If the person you mentioned does not get the results you want, what do you do next?' The questions focusing on community problems include needing a borehole (access to potable water), a school, and a road. The questions focusing on individual problems include three that focus on material requests (school fees, finding a job, tools for a job) and three that focus on issues of law and order (land dispute, been a victim of a theft, and if someone is flirting with their spouse). Each time an institution was identified as the respondent's choice to address a given need it was recorded; the tabular results are displayed in Table 2.

Though these questions were open-ended, in coding six institutions alone registered at least 5 percent of responses for any given issue. These include District Assemblyman, Member of Parliament, Judge/Magistrate, Police, NGO, and Chief. This collection of institutions is not exhaustive, but does represent the supply of institutions that are most visible and active at the local level. While open-ended questions present issues after the fact with data cleaning, we wanted respondents to be free to identify anyone or anything they view as a governance provider no matter how unlikely an institution may be able to help from our vantage point. This allows us to capture the phenomenon of an institution developing a problem-solver reputation regardless of expertise or ability and absent the introduction of our biases.

Table 2. Who would respondent contact by problem.

	District Assemblyman	Member of Parliament	Judge / Magistrate	Police	NGO	Chief
Borehole						
N	61	279	0	0	6	28
Percent	15.25	69.75	0	0	1.50	7.00
School						
N	48	273	0	0	4	40
Percent	12.00	68.25	0	0	1.00	10.00
Road						
N	47	293	0	0	4	26
Percent	11.75	73.25	0	0	1.00	6.5
Fees						
N	26	190	1	0	8	5
Percent	6.50	47.50	0.25	0	2.00	1.25
Find a Job						
N	31	191	0	0	5	9
Percent	7.75	47.75	0	0	1.25	2.25
Tools for a Job						
N	30	160	0	1	20	8
Percent	7.50	40.00	0	0.25	5.00	2.00
Land Dispute						
N	3	1	45	28	0	297
Percent	0.75	0.25	11.25	7.00	0	74.25
Property Stolen						
N	0	0	2	198	0	191
Percent	0	0	0.50	49.5	0	47.75
Flirt with Spouse						
N	5	0	80	79	0	112
Percent	1.25	0	20.00	19.75	0	28.00

Several important observations can be made about the distribution of institutions offered by our respondents when seeking aid. First, and significantly in terms of decentralisation policy, the District Assemblyman is identified as being able to offer help in six of nine problems at a level of at least 5 percent of respondents. This suggests, optimistically, that District Assemblymen can be effective suppliers of public goods if given the resources and increased capacity (Debrah, 2014). Second, Members of Parliament are the dominant providers of solutions to common problems. Across six of nine problems, respondents identified Members of Parliament as their first choice at a minimum 40 percent and a maximum of 73 percent. Given that Members of Parliament are the direct local connection to the central government, where resources are largely concentrated, it is entirely reasonable and rational that our respondents look to this institution for solutions that demand resources. Third, judges/magistrates and police are seen as very specialised institutions. Both judges/magistrates and police are seen as viable options when a spouse is being flirted with, approximately 20 percent each. Judges/magistrates are also identified as being able to help resolve a land dispute at just over 11 percent. Police are overwhelmingly seen as the institution to seek out if property has been stolen, almost 50 percent. Fourth, NGOs are rarely seen in any significant numbers as being a primary institution to seek out assistance for the solution to a problem. This may be surprising to those that argue for the important role that NGOs can play given their potential to leverage funding and expertise, but, at least for our respondents, NGOs are not widely seen as viable option to help solve any of the nine problems (Mohan, 2002). Lastly, Chiefs have a strong role to play, if not a dominant one, in resolving problems that involve some manner of conflict. Chiefs were identified by nearly 75 percent of respondents as the institution to seek out if there is a land dispute. Similarly, though at lower levels, Chiefs were seen as institutions that could help with stolen property (almost 48 percent) and flirtations with a spouse (28 percent). This is not surprising given the historical roots that Chiefs have played in land allocation and management as well as embodying cultural values and practices (Crook, 2005). The observation that that a large proportion of respondents did not identify one of the six governance providers as an option for school fees, a job and tools, and a disagreement over one's spouse suggests that many Ghanaians find these problems best solved via self-help.

Problem solving by constituency

Our main question of interest is how the Ghanaian public decides between the array of institutions available to help them solve a problem of either individual or community importance. Our research design, a most different systems approach, allows us to make comparisons between our respondents based

on which of the four constituencies they come from. The survey presented respondents with a series of nine problems that affected the individual personally or their community and asked whom they would contact about that problem. The underlying motivation is to gauge the success of decentralisation policies that are meant to empower local institutions by devolving power from the national government. The constituencies that we surveyed allow us to observe differences between respondents in the North and South, capital and regional locales, urban and rural settings, as well as rich and poor enclaves. We present these comparisons visually using a series of bar charts in Figures 1–9.[6] The tabular version of the data is available in the appendix, Table A1.

Figure 1 presents respondents' answer to 'Who would you contact about a community borehole?' One is immediately struck by the similarities between Bolgatanga (regional, North), Odododiodoo (poor, urban, capital, South), and Ayawaso West (wealthy, urban, capital, South): each roughly has identified their respective Member of Parliament followed by their District Assemblyman as the two institutions to provide a community borehole. Nabdam (poor, rural, North) is much more reliant on its Member of Parliament comparatively and is much less reliant on its District Assemblyman.

The question regarding whom our respondents would contact about a community school is displayed in Figure 2. Across all four constituencies, there is a high reliance on Members of Parliament and very little consideration given to local governance institutions, specifically District Assemblymen; only in Bolgatanga, a regional northern capital, does District Assemblyman reach above 20 percent.
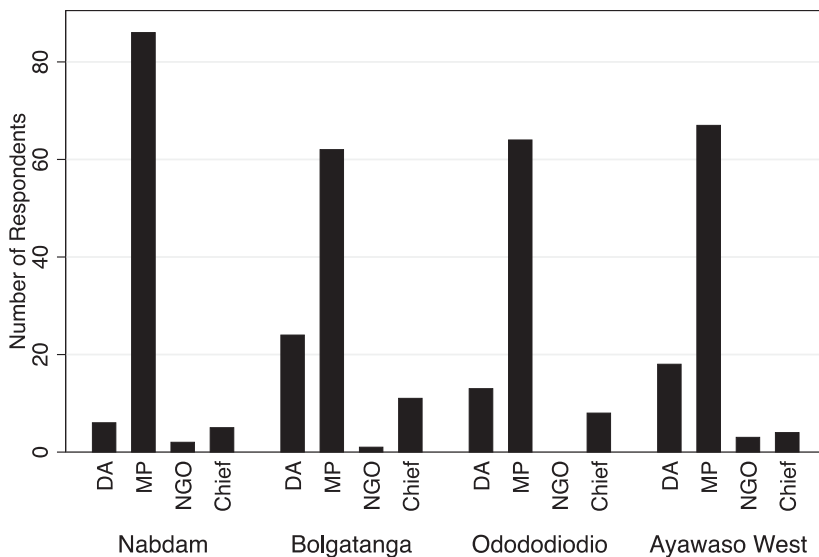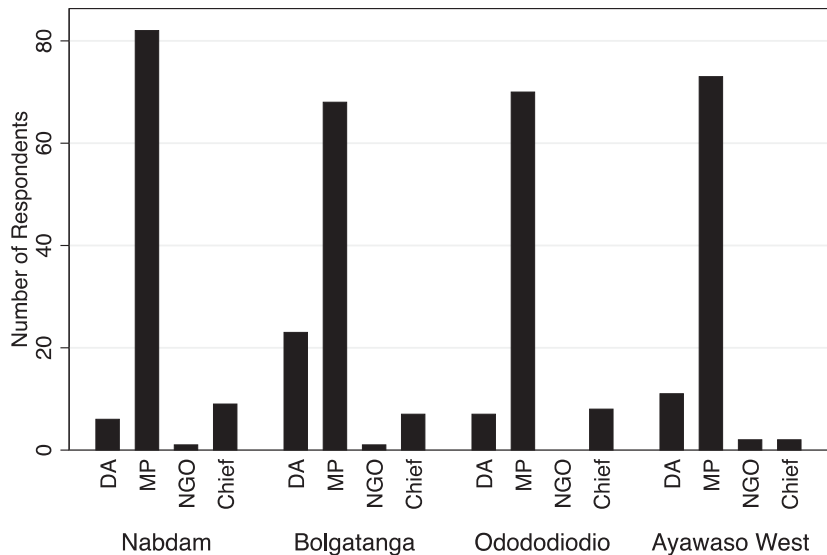

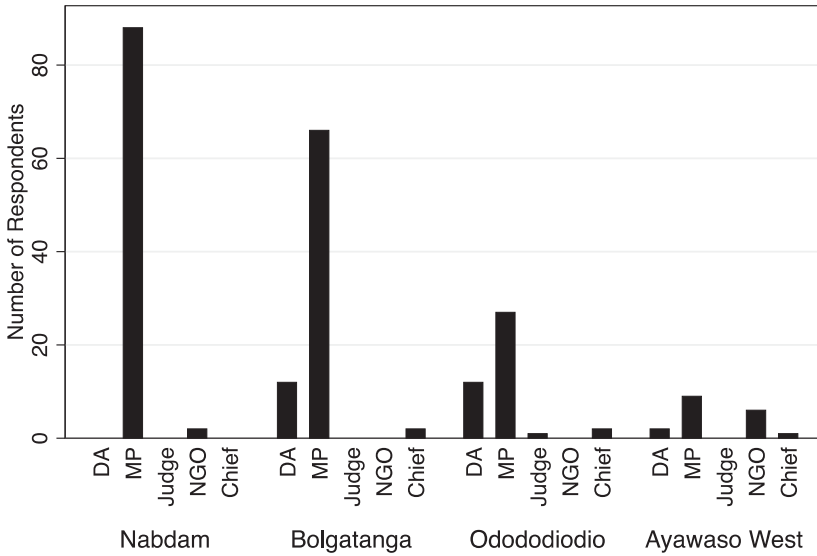**Figure 1.** Who would you contact about a community borehole?.
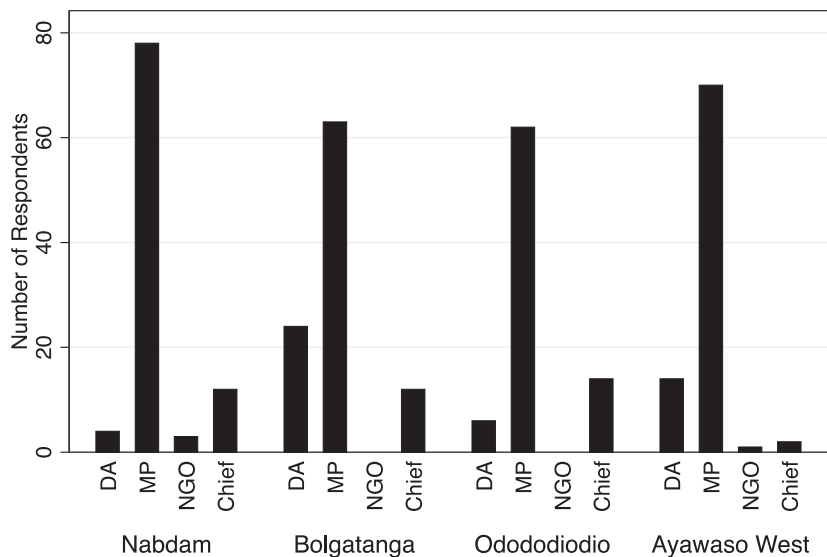
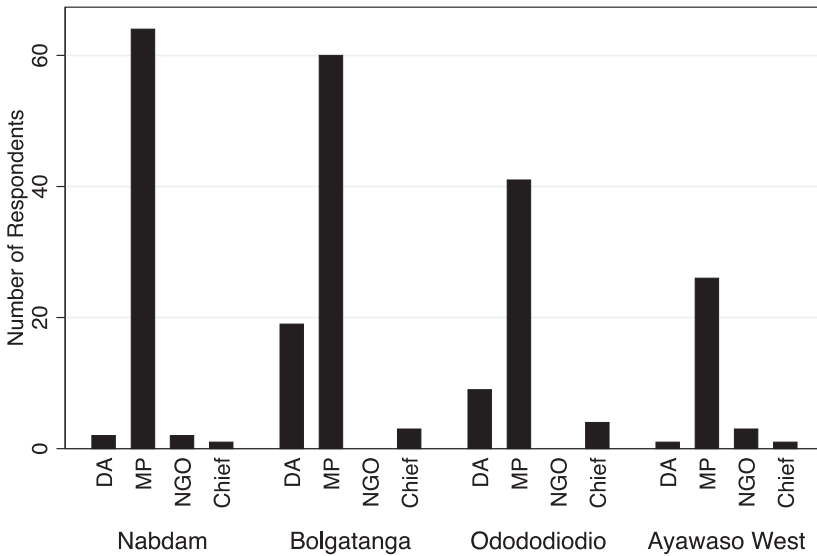**Figure 2.** Who would you contact about a community school?.

When prompted about whom our respondents would contact about a community road all four constituencies, once again, chose their Members of Parliament. Figure 3 demonstrates a similar dynamic in terms of response that we observe in Figures 1 and 2: Members of Parliament, institutions with political power directly connected to the national government, is the overwhelming choice of majorities across all four constituencies regardless

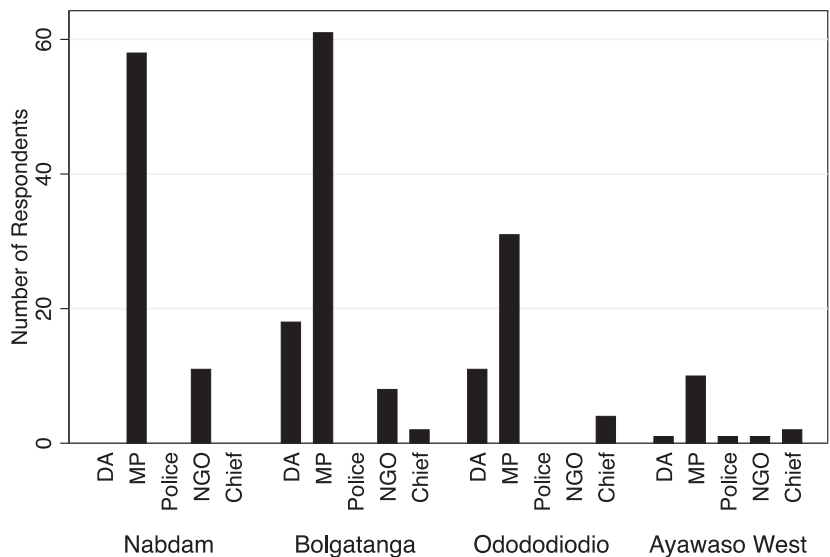**Figure 3.** Who would you contact about a community road?.

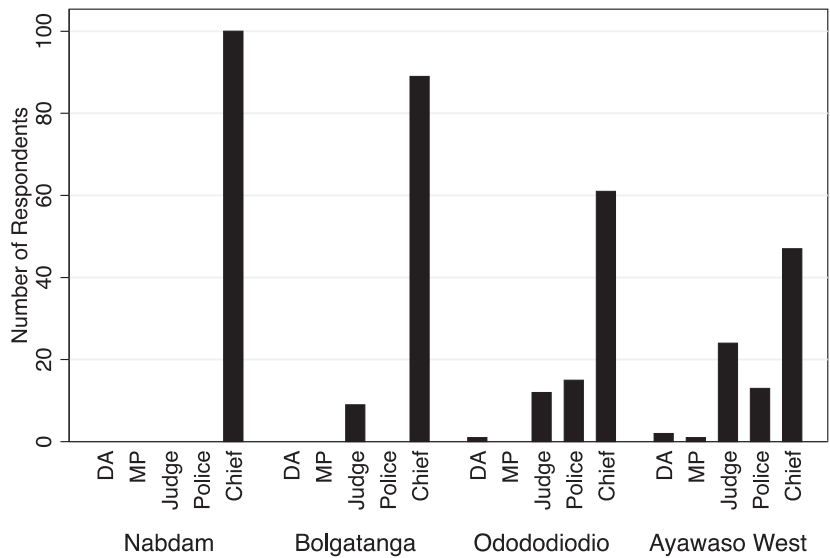**Figure 4.** Who would you contact about school fees?.

Figure 5. Who would you contact about finding a job?.

of wealth, status, or location. In terms of decentralisation policy empowering local governance, we would expect much higher response rates for District Assemblyman, but the responses here indicate a wide public perception about which institution can bring about positive development and policy change with regard to high cost public works projects.
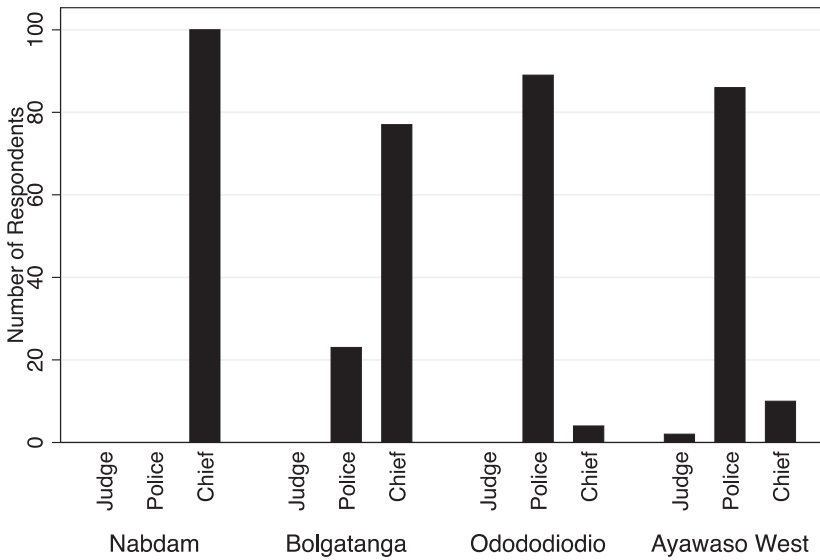
Figure 6. Who would you contact about finding tools for work?.

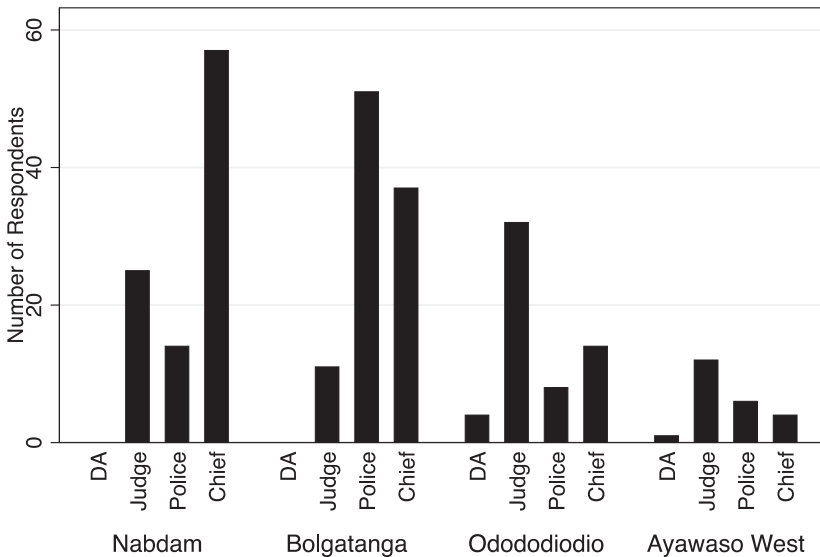**Figure 7.** Who would you contact about a land dispute?.

Figure 4 displays respondents' answers about whom they would contact about school fees. Here we observe dramatic differences between the four constituencies. The starkest differences are between the northern and the southern constituencies. Nabdam, poor and in the rural North, demonstrates a remarkable dependency on their Member of Parliament to the almost total

Figure 8. Who would you contact about something of yours being stolen?.

Figure 9. Who would you contact about someone flirting with your spouse.

exclusion of any other institutional actor. Bolgatanga, also in the North, displays a strong reliance on their Member of Parliament, but also non-trivial number of respondents also identified their District Assemblyman. Both Odododiodoo and Ayawaso West are located in the capital, in the South, and in urban settings, and neither constituency, in any numbers approaching a

considerable amount, identify a single institution that could help them with school fees. These respondents indicate self-reliance in this issue area. It is remarkable that there is such a divergence in perceptions from North to South about whether any government, non-government or traditional institution could help with this problem.

When asked whom our respondents would contact about finding a job, the dominant answer across all four constituencies, shown in Figure 5, was Member of Parliament, but these rates, once again, vary along a North–South divide. Respondents in Nabdam and Bolgatanga, both in the North, would contact their Member of Parliament, whereas, respondents in Odododiodoo and Ayawaso West, are much less reliant on any potential purveyor of governance.

Figure 6 displays whom our respondents would contact about finding tools for work. A familiar pattern is again observed. Member of Parliament is the preferred institution of contact across all four constituencies, but this rate of contact is much higher in the northern constituencies (Nabdam and Bolgatanga) than in the southern (Odododiodoo and Ayawaso West). The responses regarding school fees (Figure 4), finding a job (Figure 5), and finding tools for work (Figure 6), all follow a similar pattern characterised by a heavy reliance on Members of Parliament and a clear differentiation between constituencies in the North and South.

When asked about whom they could contact about a land dispute, respondents strongly indicated a preference for a traditional institution, a Chief. Figure 7 demonstrates the universal response in Nabdam to turning to the Chief to settle such a dispute and the majority (Bolgatanga and Odododiodoo) or near majority (Ayawaso West) of respondents in each of the other constituencies as well. It is instructive that traditional institutions, embodied by Chiefs, still wield such effective control over what has historically been under their purview even in a modernising democratic state and that this is not limited by geography or population density (Crook, 2005).

Figure 8 displays whom our respondents would contact about something of theirs being stolen. The differences between the North and South are again illuminating. Nabdam and Bolgatanga respond that they would contact their Chief and not the Police by overwhelming numbers. The almost exact opposite dynamic occurs in Odododiodoo and Ayawaso West, the southern constituencies, who clearly would contact the Police. It is striking that basic local governance structures, such as the Police, have not yet replaced traditional institutions in resolving such common conflicts in much of Ghana.

Lastly, Figure 9 illustrates which institutions our respondents would contact if someone were flirting with their spouse. There is quite a bit of variation from constituency to constituency with Nabdam turning to the Chief, Bolgatanga the Police, and both Odododiodio and Ayawaso West a judge or magistrate though in smaller numbers. In addition to this variation is a North–South

divide in terms of numbers of respondents that identified any institution as appropriate to contact about such a problem.

Given the differing characteristics of our four constituencies, it is not too surprising that there is variance across them in terms of how they understand governance. Within this variance there are certainly interesting hypotheses that rise to the fore. The wealthier the constituency, for instance, the more likely respondents are to adopt a libertarian understanding of governance when it comes to potential social welfare items like school fees and finding a job. Residents in relatively cosmopolitan Accra additionally seem more inclined to turn to the police when they believe a crime has been commited, but residents of the hinterlands see traditional authorities as a readier option. But if we were to generalise from our findings, it appears that there are two dominant institutions in the minds of the Ghanaian public, at least across these four constituencies. One is a formal democratic institution that is a creation of the national constitution and the other is a traditional institution that is a vestige of pre-democratic rule. Members of Parliament and Chiefs are who our respondents identify as being able to resolve the types of problems that they might regularly encounter. If the decentralisation policy is meant to empower formal local governance structures then we should have observed much higher levels of respondents who would contact their District Assemblyman, but in no constituency and for not a single problem did a majority or even a plurality of respondents attribute this institution with being able to provide assistance.

Conclusion

Critics and criticism of decentralisation policies have properly focused on the apparent disconnect between assurances of better governance and increased development with the reality that these ambitions have been largely unrealised (Ojendal & Dellnas, 2013; Olowu & Wunsch, 2004; Smoke, 2003; Treisman, 2007). Certainly, local governing institutions, particularly District Assemblies, have received an abundance of criticism for this lack of success. The institution was, after all, created as part of Ghana's decentralisation push. Explanations for failures focusing on District Assemblies abound: local administrative incompetence, clashes between local and central government officials, and irregularities in the transfer of funds to local officials to carry out programmes (Ahwoi, 2010; Ayee, 1999, 2008; Debrah, 2009). Others have noted that NGOs, which may have greater access to resources and increased capacities to deliver projects, could also be responsible for undermining local governance (Mohan, 2002). The failure to leverage culturally entrenched institutions, such as the traditional institution of chiefs, could also play a role (Schatzberg, 2001; Shivakumar, 2005). Myers and Fridy (2017) have noted that when chiefs and district assemblies cooperate then public estimates of performance evaluations

increase for both. All this is to say that there may just be too many institutions created through decentralisation policies and they may not be the right type to succeed in the context that they operate (Hyden, 2017; Lentz, 1998).

To further understand and unravel the challenges associated with decentralisation in Ghana, we deployed a four-constituency survey and asked respondents whom they would go to for help when faced with a total of nine common problems. These problems range from community-based to individual-based and allow for open-ended responses. The institutions regularly offered included District Assemblyman, Member of Parliament, Judge/Magistrate, Police, Chief, and NGO. First, we undertook to compare the constituency survey sites to verify our most different systems design approach. Highly statistically significant paired t-tests confirmed our selection method. Next we explored which institutions our respondents would contact across the range of nine problems. Those tabular results indicate that two institutions are dominant: Members of Parliament and Chiefs. Lastly, we employed bar charts to graphically display the differences in whom our respondents would contact for each problem according to their respective constituency. Though there is certainly some variation from survey site to survey site, the overwhelming number of responses indicate that Members of Parliament (a national institution) and Chiefs (a traditional institution) are where respondents take problems to be solved. The most striking pieces of evidence indicate just how unlikely the Ghanaian public is to seek out formal local institutions, District Assemblies.

Under the current conceptions of decentralisation policies, District Assemblies are tasked with delivering services because it is thought the empowerment of local governance will lead to democratisation (Ndegwa, 2002). However, the evidence from our survey demonstrates that citizens do not view District Assemblies as competent governing actors, which undermines the policy goals associated with decentralisation. Our findings suggest that the most effective institutions for solving local problems are not locally imposed institutions, but national (Members of Parliament) and traditional (Chiefs) institutions. Some have called on a reexamination of institutions in the African context and our survey evidence is supportive of such a judgment (Hyden, 2017). Berk and Galvan (2009) urge flexibility in institution building and institutional development based on who people experience and interact with those institutions. Consistent with that spirit in mind, Members of Parliament and Chiefs need to be leveraged, perhaps in cooperation, to facilitate the local development sought after by decentralisation policies, instead of the imposition of an institution, District Assemblies, that do not have the institutional capacity or public support to be effective more than two decades into its existence. The debate over how to organise, order, and understand governance in Africa is an old one, but we argue that our survey evidence provides a clear direction going forward from citizens themselves and one that is, most

importantly, context-sensitive and is reflective of learned experience (Berk & Galvan, 2009; Crowder, 1964; Schatzberg, 2001).

Notes

1. Surveys were administered in the summers of 2009 and 2010. This was a period of National Democratic Congress (NDC) control of the presidency and legislature but the potential avenues of domestic governance (District Assemblies have been around since 1989 and the Parliament since 1993 for instance) have remained the same under New Patriotic Party (NPP) control. This period is also after the dramatic increases in national wealth Ghana saw between 2000 and 2008 as the country entered the present period more modest but sustained growth.
2. Our approach began by first using ten randomly generated enumeration areas maps situated in each constituency provided by Ghana Statistical Services. The area enumeration maps were used to conduct the 2000 national census and contain between one hundred and five hundred households each. Sketches of the block or village enumerated as well as a written description of its boundaries were included. For each enumeration area ten surveys were collected by randomly selecting ten households and then randomly selecting a survey respondent from within each household. A neighbouring household was substituted only after two failed attempts to survey the randomly selected respondent were made.
3. 'What is the highest level of schooling you have completed?'
4. 'Do you come from this area [Nabdam, Bolgatanga, Odododiodio, Ayawaso West] or are you from outside the area?'
5. 'Ghana has many political parties. Which do you think brings more development to the country?'
6. The careful reader will note that not all institutions are present in every figure. Any institution that is absent from a figure is due directly to that institution not garnering a single response from any of our respondents.

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Appendix

Table A1. Who would respondent contact by constituency.

	Nabdam	Bolgatanga	Odododiodio	Ayawaso West
Borehole				
District Assembly	6	24	13	18
Member of Parliament	86	62	64	67
Judge	0	0	0	0
Police	0	0	0	0
NGO	2	1	0	3
Chief	5	11	8	4

(*Continued*)

Table A1. Continued.

	Nabdam	Bolgatanga	Odododiodio	Ayawaso West
School				
District Assembly	4	24	6	14
Member of Parliament	78	63	62	70
Judge	0	0	0	0
Police	0	0	0	0
NGO	3	0	0	1
Chief	12	12	14	2
Road				
District Assembly	6	23	7	11
Member of Parliament	82	68	70	73
Judge	0	0	0	0
Police	0	0	0	0
NGO	1	1	0	2
Chief	9	7	8	2
School Fees				
District Assembly	0	12	12	2
Member of Parliament	88	66	27	9
Judge	0	0	1	0
Police	0	0	0	0
NGO	2	0	0	6
Chief	0	2	2	1
Find Job				
District Assembly	2	19	9	1
Member of Parliament	64	60	41	26
Judge	0	0	0	0
Police	0	0	0	0
NGO	2	0	0	3
Chief	1	3	4	1
Job Tools				
District Assembly	0	18	11	1
Member of Parliament	58	61	31	10
Judge	0	0	0	0
Police	0	0	0	1
NGO	11	8	0	1
Chief	0	2	4	2
Land Dispute				
District Assembly	0	0	1	2
Member of Parliament	0	0	0	1
Judge	0	9	12	24
Police	0	0	15	13
NGO	0	0	0	0
Chief	100	89	61	47
Stolen Property				
District Assembly	0	0	0	0
Member of Parliament	0	0	0	0
Judge	0	0	0	2
Police	0	23	89	86
NGO	0	0	0	0
Chief	100	77	4	10
Flirt				
District Assembly	0	0	4	1
Member of Parliament	0	0	0	0
Judge	25	11	32	12
Police	14	51	8	6
NGO	0	0	0	0
Chief	57	37	14	4